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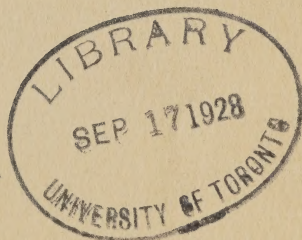
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# The French-Canadian Homespun Industry

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DEPARTMENT OF TRADE AND COMMERCE  
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# The French-Canadian Homespun Industry



The Habitant Farm.

From a Painting by Corelus Kreighof (1812-1872)



# The French-Canadian Homespun Industry

Homespun, the staple textile of pioneer days, is still made to-day in some parts of the Province of Quebec by methods centuries old. French-Canadian homespuns are sought and valued by connoisseurs the world over. Handed down from mother to daughter, spinning wheel and hand-loom are cherished family treasures—intimate links between the Quebec of to-day and the Quebec of old. Patterns and colourings of the brave old days still prevail.

To appreciate the beauty of French-Canadian homespun with its soft shades, and its honest and homely workmanship, one must see it made into bedspreads, blankets, table and bureau covers, scarfs, workbags of lovely soft colourings—blue being the favourite—ornamented by geometrical designs of white wool fashioned by loops of the yarn, or again in the piece for coats, sports suits, etc.

## HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE FRENCH-CANADIAN HOMESPUN INDUSTRY

The textile trades were given an early and successful beginning in New France by the encouragement afforded to domestic manufactures of all kinds of clothing by French governors and officials. In Quebec, cradle of New France, the industry grew and flourished. So successful was it, even in this early period, that Jean Talon, the illustrious intendant, pupil of Colbert, in 1671, was able to inform his government at Paris that he could, if necessary, clothe himself from head to foot with garments made in the new Colony. Far removed from the home sources of supply and situated in a rigorous climate, the *habitant* perforce turned to the production of fabrics and clothing. Raw materials were to be had in abundance, and the flax and wool spinning wheels together with the loom were essentials in the home of the *habitant*. Under these conditions the women of the Colony were able to make everything from clothes and towels to carpets and bedding.

To the incoming Loyalists and colonists of a later period, homespun clothing was equally essential, and in the early years of the last century

in every settlement and in isolated homes in the wilderness of British America, women might be seen weaving the woollen garments which their families were to wear.

As years passed on, however, and the settlements grew in number and importance, a woollen industry was established in the more modern sense of that word. The saw mills required at first for cutting up the timber needed for pioneer houses and furniture, and afterwards for the export trade, and the grist mills scattered here and there throughout Canada for dealing with the farmers' grain, were added to by carding and fulling mills of American design and manufacture. Upper Canada, in 1827, had 91 of the former and 79 of the latter, and Lower Canada in 1842 had 186 carding mills—which gradually took the place of the old hand cards—and 144 fulling mills. In the Maritime Provinces the hand-loom and spinning wheel remained the favourite for some time after these dates, as they also did amongst the *habitants* of Lower Canada.

The manufacture of woollen goods on power-looms was begun in 1837, at Chambly, in Lower Canada, and at about the same time at Georgetown, Upper Canada. The principal progress in this direction was made some twenty years later, partly as a result of the influx of Scotch weavers, and partly because of increased resources in capital. But the beginnings had been made in nearly all these industries, and much has been due, then and since, to the clever workmanship, the natural patience and the innate dexterity of the French-Canadian.

A revival in the art of making homespun articles has recently taken place in the Province of Quebec, and this revival is due in no small measure to the efforts of the Department of Agriculture of Quebec, which has appointed a Director of *L'Economie Domestique*, under whose direction lecturers go amongst the women on the land to teach them the art of weaving French-Canadian homespuns. Some *Ecoles Ménagères* have been also instituted at various points in the Province, the aim of which is to give instruction in household science in general and in the homespun industry in particular. Finally, Lady Farmers' Clubs (*Cercles des Fermières*) have been formed, their primary object being the promotion of household industries. It is hoped that the movement will spread to the whole of rural Quebec.

### SHEEP RAISING

Sheep raising in New France dates back to an early period after its discovery. It was well adapted to the nature of the country and the methods of farming. Nearly all of the more hardy breeds flourished. The sheep known in the Province of Quebec as the *Canadien* is perhaps



the best type for the climate and for the requirements of industry. Improvements are constantly being effected both in the breeds of sheep and in the quality of the wool.

### CARDING

After the wool has been tub-washed and thereby thoroughly scoured of its dirt and wool-grease, it is prepared for the spinning wheel by means of a carding machine. Hand cards, consisting of small rectangular pieces of leather, backed with board and provided with a handle, through which at regular intervals wires with slightly bent ends are stuck, have practically gone out of use. Carding machines now serve the purpose of straightening and intermixing the wool fibres, such straightening and intermixing being indispensable to give the tensile strength and the homogeneity necessary to the spinning of satisfactory yarn. When the intermixture is deemed to be sufficient, the wool is cleared from the wires of the cards and it is condensed in the shape of a loose roll ready for elongation and twisting in the spinning operation.

### SPINNING

The spinning of wool is generally done upon the hand spinning wheel, which consists essentially of a spindle made to revolve by means of a cord passing around it and over a large wheel which is set agoing by the foot placed upon a sort of pedal. The carded wool is attached to the spindle, and it is elongated to the desired extent. When the big wheel is in motion it causes the spindle to revolve, and the binding twist is put into the yarn and on bobbins.

This process is slow and unremunerative, but many French-Canadian women spin all the wool they intend to manufacture. Of the wool spun in the Province of Quebec for the home industry, in 1926, 60 per cent was spun at home—a woman being able to spin from  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 pounds a day--and 40 per cent in mills specializing in this phase of the work where the fee charged amounts to approximately 35 cents a pound.

### DYEING

Dyeing is generally carried out at home, and the wool is preferably dyed while still in the form of loose fleece, or again after it has been carded. In the first case, more satisfactory results are obtained; in the second, it is difficult to bring about a complete evenness of colour.

Proper dyeing is a process calling for considerable knowledge of materials and methods, and for great skill in the handling of the fabrics while in the tub. The French-Canadian women, through long practice, have special aptitude in this work. The dyes used are either manufactured at home from herbs and ingredients, or bought in prepared form.



Habitant Woman Spinning.



## FULLING

The fulling of cloth before the introduction of the fulling mill consisted in soaking the fabric thoroughly in warm soapy water and then in beating it with sticks. This operation was done in the fulling trough—the trunk of a tree hollowed out more or less in the shape of a boat. The pistons were called *demoiselles*; four fullers stood on each side. (Among the Scotch, fulling was done by hand on a large table.) Not much attention was evidently given to the evenness or exact degree in which the fulling took



The Old Trough which was used to shrink and beat the Homespun. (Auge à foulon.)

place. By the mechanical fulling machine the fabrics receive the proper treatment. The operations of this machine are a sort of imitation of the household process. The cloth is kept thoroughly wet with soapy water, and is subjected to repeated beatings. The fuller's contribution lay in the knowledge, gained from experience, of the mixture of soap and water, and of the proper speed and duration of the fulling operation. It is after all a question of shrinking the cloth evenly and thoroughly without affecting the strength of the fabric.



### **SHEARING**

The purpose of this process is to clip evenly the ends of wool fibres which project from the woven woollen fabric. In the old days, hand cards similar to those used in carding were drawn repeatedly over the surface of the cloth, and the shearing itself was accomplished by means of hand shears. At present, modern machines are generally employed for this process which demands a peculiar skill.

### **THE CONSTRUCTION OF HOMESPUN**

If a piece of homespun is examined, it will be found to consist of a number of longitudinal threads placed side by side and interlaced by a continuous single or double thread. The latter thread passes alternately above and below or before and behind the longitudinal threads, crossing and intersecting them.

The longitudinal threads of a piece of woven material are called the warp. They are so named because in order to allow them to be intersected conveniently by the continuous crossing thread, they have to be warped, that is, tightly strained in position on some kind of frame prepared for the purpose. The continuous crossing thread has several names such as weft, woof, or shoot.

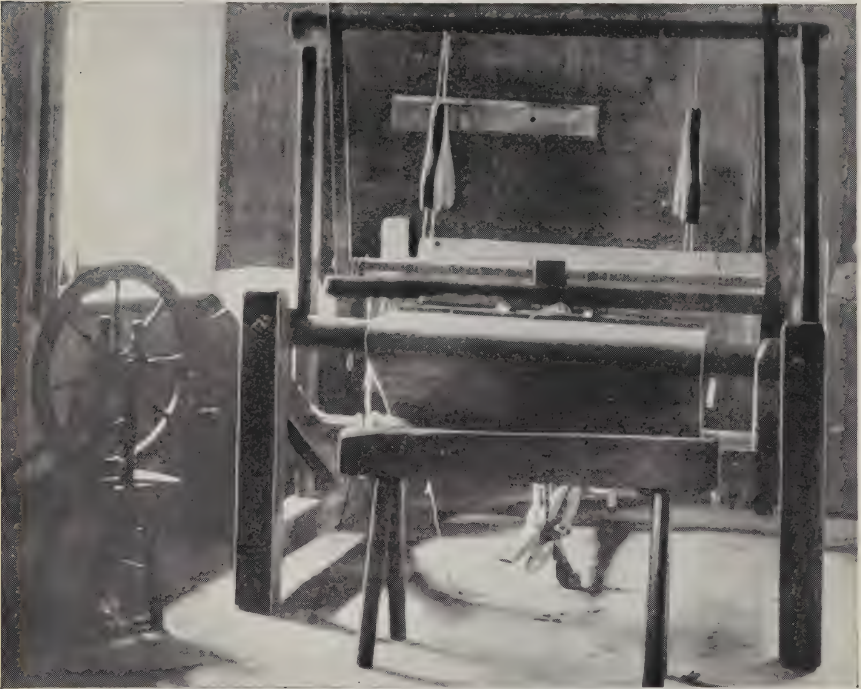
The warp threads consist of several fine threads twisted together. This is done to give added strength. The weft may be single and the thread only slightly twisted, as this makes it soft so that the warp and weft are easily pressed together into a firm material. Again, the warp may consist simply of wool.

### **HAND LOOM WEAVING**

It is true that there are many lines of weaving now produced by the power-loom, too intricate to be attempted on the hand-loom, but the weaving of linen, cotton, woollen and silk threads into materials of strength and beauty can quite well be carried on. Notwithstanding the existence of the power-loom and all its wonderful possibilities, the hand-loom is likely to survive in the Province of Quebec, and it is hoped that at some time in the near future the domestic occupation of weaving and spinning in both flax and wool will have a greater place in the economy of the Province. The appreciation of handwork has, during the past decade, increased in the estimation of the public, and its beauty of workmanship and wearing qualities are being more fully recognized. The time should come when

the French-Canadian homespun will be in demand not only by tourists seeking something typically Canadian to bring back home, but also by Canadians themselves.

Of late, much has been said of the beautiful hand-weaving done by the women of Quebec. So attractive is this work that little difficulty is experienced in disposing of the articles woven. The prices are rather low in comparison with the quality of the goods produced, but this industry is



Weaving Apparatus.

remunerative in this sense that the work is performed in the long winter season in the course of which nothing else could readily be done, the utilization of spare time meaning, after all, double saving.

There is no doubt as to the superior wearing qualities of a well-made hand-woven article. This is plainly shown if the hand-made and the machine-made articles are compared. Hand-loom weaving also is superior to machine weaving if judged by the effect it is likely to have on the worker. The hand weaver is employed in a pleasant, ingenious occupation which exercises all her faculties, while the attendant on a power-loom is engaged in a monotonous toil in which intense watchfulness only is required.

### DESCRIPTION OF THE HAND-LOOM

The essential parts of a hand-loom are: the *frame*, which supports the working parts; the *yarn-beam*, at the back part of the frame, upon which the warp-threads are wound; the *cloth-beam*, at the front part of the frame, upon which the cloth is wound as the weaving proceeds; the *heddles* and their mounting; and the *batten* which carries the *reed*. The warp-threads extend in parallel relation from the yarn-beam to the cloth-beam, also being passed serially through the loops or eyes of the heddles, and through the interspaces of the reed. The operations of winding the warp-threads upon the yarn-beam, and passing them in due order through the loops or eyes of the heddles, and the interspaces of the reed, are collectively called "setting up the piece." The function of the heddles is to form the shed for the passage of the shuttle. The warp-threads are separated systematically by the heddles into two or more series, each controlled and alternately drawn upward and downward by the vertical motion of the heddles, thus leaving an opening or shed between the ranks of warp-threads, through which the shuttle is thrown or shot by the hand, or by pickers operated by the hand of the weaver in the hand-loom. The reed is carried by the batten, which swings radially on its bearings through an arc small in proportion to the radius. It is composed of a series of thin slats or wires arranged in parallel relation between two parallel bars placed at such distance apart that the thread of the warp passing through the interspaces between the slats or wires may be serially opened or separated by the heddles, in forming the shed, without impinging upon these bars. The function of the reed is to force the thread of weft, woof or filling as passed between the warp-threads by the shuttle, as near as desirable to that part of the weft-thread which has just previously been embraced by the warp-threads. For this purpose the batten is swung so that the slats or wires of the reed drive the weft-thread against the previously woven part of the texture with a sharp blow. The weft-thread is wound upon a bobbin or quill which turns upon a wire in the shuttle, and permits the thread to unwind when the latter passes to and fro through the sheds as the latter are successively formed by the action of the heddles. The shuttle is made of a piece of hardwood pointed at each end, and having a recess in the body for the reception of the bobbin or quill. Frequently the pointed ends are finished with metal.

Ready-made hand-loom in various dimensions may be procured in Montreal. Hand-loom are sometimes quite crude, built frequently by the local carpenter, if not the product of the home workbench. Some improvement, however, in the character of the loom seems to have been made, but there is no change in its essential parts.



The operation of the hand-loom calls for quite a great deal of energy and skill. Weaving, however, is quite exclusively a household operation, although in some instances few women in small shops are engaged in weaving up the homespun yarn into cloths of the customers' specifications.

#### FOOT-POWER LOOM

There is again the foot-power loom which has recently been introduced into the province of Quebec. This loom, of American manufacture, sells approximately at \$135 f.o.b. Davenport, Ohio. Only two may as yet be found in Quebec, one of which is owned by the *Ecole Ménagère*, Ste. Martine, the other by the *Cercle des Fermières* of St. Andre de Kamouraska. Its price will probably retard its sale.

#### FLAX HOMESPUN—KNITTED ARTICLES—CARPETS

Flax too is spun in the Province of Quebec, though not to the same extent as wool, and sturdy brown linens are produced that will stand the wear of years as well as being remarkable for beauty. Carpets, known as



Young Girl beginning a Hooked Rug.



A Homespun Rug.

*catalognes*, or rag carpets are extensively woven. Besides the *catalognes*, the women are skilled in the making of braided and drawn-in rugs. Very fine specimens of this handicraft may be seen in many of the farm houses, particularly in the lower St. Lawrence region. Hand-made socks and mittens, and sometimes toques, are also made in bright hues and diversified patterns, for the *habitant* has a keen eye for colour.

### THE CEINTURE FLÊCHÉE

Of all the arts and crafts of French Canada the one to which the greatest interest is attached is chiefly an ornamental one, although the article produced may serve a useful purpose as well. This refers to the woven or braided sash, called the *ceinture flêchée*, which was very popular sixty or seventy years ago, but which has now gone out of use to such an extent that its weaving has become almost a lost art. The name *ceinture flêchée* is given to this belt or sash on account of the arrow-like pattern which is woven into it. The use of some kinds of sashes dates back to the seventeenth century, when it formed part of the costume of the scholars of the Seminary of Quebec. A *ceinture* of some brilliant colour still remains part of the uniform of the boys attending some of the Quebec colleges, adding a great deal to its picturesqueness. Sashes of a similar nature were also worn in the early days by the *coureurs de bois*. But these were not the sashes of finely-twisted wool and elegant workmanship which are popularly known as the *ceintures de l'Assomption*, l'Assomption being generally thought to be the place where the true *ceinture* originated.

The quality of the wool used in the making up of a *ceinture* has always interested those who have examined it closely. It is fine, hard, lustrous, and very tightly twisted. The manner of weaving is difficult to describe. About 300 to 400 threads, some 14 feet in length, are first prepared, one end of these being fastened to the floor and the other to a hook or window handle. These are kept spread by means of a small wooden arm, and the weaving is done entirely with the fingers. The work is very slow, a good weaver not being able to make more than six or eight inches in ten hours. As these sashes are from 8 to 10 feet long, it is easy to see that a great deal of work is involved. Sashes of colonial days sell for as much as \$150, and some of the best specimens are to-day valued at from \$200 to \$300. This is a piece of domestic handicraft peculiar to a certain part of French Canada.

A revival of the art of making these beautiful specimens of French-Canadian handicraft has recently taken place. The Sisters of Providence, Montreal, have learned the art from one or two of the very few old





Weaving an Arrowed Sash.

*habitant* women who still practice it, and who members of the community have been set apart for the pursuit of this art. For art it is, and an art worthy to be ranked beside that of the carver in wood or stone.

### IMPORTANCE OF THE HOMESPUN INDUSTRY

There were, in 1926, 109 Lady Farmers' Clubs (*Cercles des Fermières*) in the Province of Quebec with a membership of 7,000, by whom homespun articles valued at \$616,000 were woven. These articles were made of wool produced on the farms, or bought in limited quantities from the mills. As the amount of homespun produced by women not belonging to the Lady Farmers' Clubs is almost negligible, the above figure may be taken as giving a fair idea of the importance of this industry.

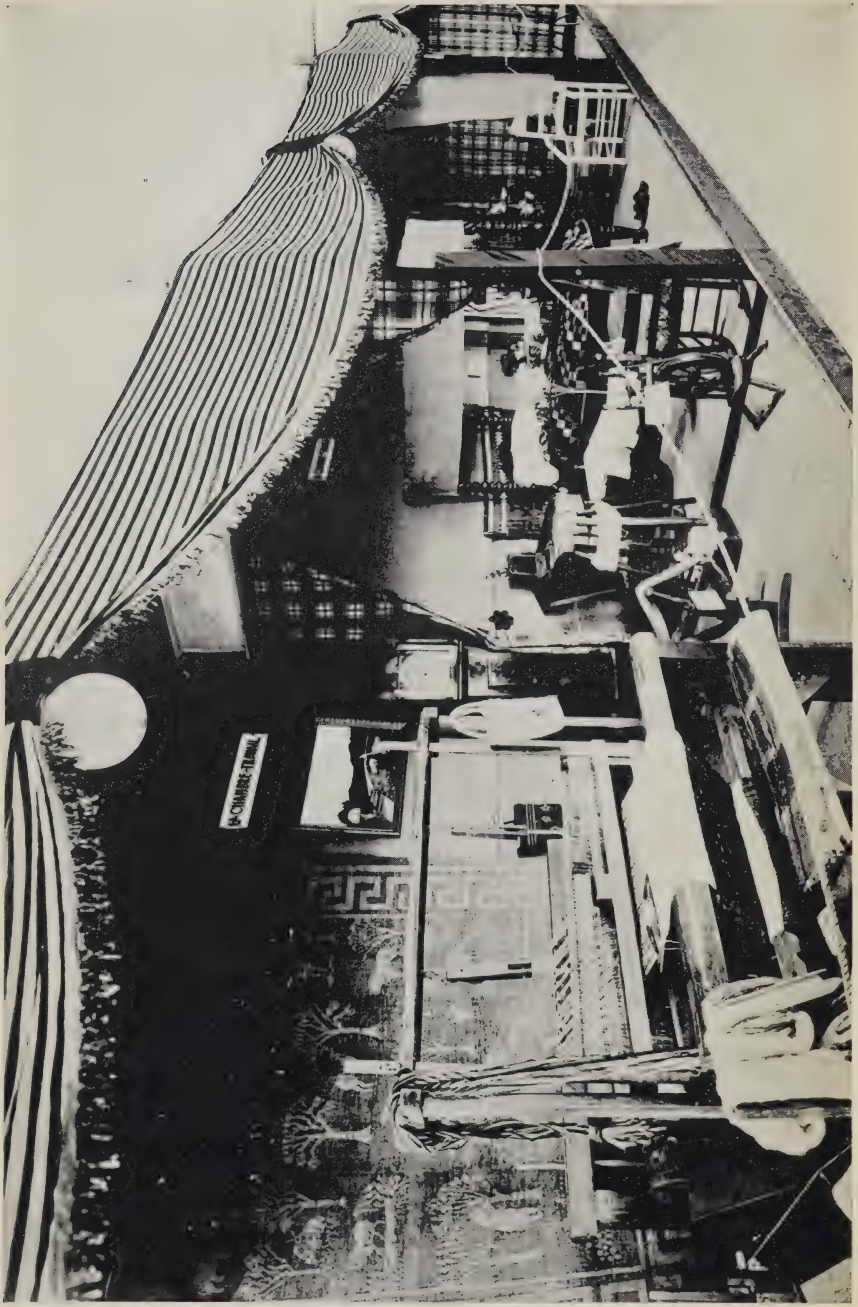
Homespun articles are generally sold by the *habitant* women to specialty shops and stores. These stores in turn sell to American tourists, and they form one of the most helpful channels by which the women of Quebec can dispose of the product of their work. Sales are also made at home.

### THE GROWTH OF THE HOMESPUN INDUSTRY

About twenty years ago the production of homespuns was almost negligible, but a revival great in importance has taken place, as the value of the sales in 1926 shows. It must not be concluded, however, that the movement is general in the Province of Quebec. Only in some parts does this industry receive real attention. In Charlevoix, Port Neuf, Gaspé and Bonaventure counties, many *habitant* women are engaged in this work, while in the other counties of the lower St. Lawrence region there are a limited number of women who add to the income of the household by the making of homespun articles. In the environs of Montreal very few have taken to the native woollen industry even for domestic purposes.

Greater efforts could be devoted to the making of homespuns, but the question is one of marketing.

The growth of the industry is steady, and the American tourists who come to the Province of Quebec provide a market for practically all that is now produced. As they come year after year in increasing numbers they not only buy largely but help to advertise the product on their return to the United States. This has provided an adequate outlet for the industry as it is at present developed. An increased production could probably



Workroom, Old French-Canadian Home, as shown at Exhibition, Quebec, 1924.



be easily disposed of in the other provinces of Canada, where the peculiar qualities of French-Canadian homespuns should be more widely known, consideration of which should form an essential feature in any prospective marketing policy.

Information regarding carding, weaving and fulling mills, firms dealing with spinning wheels and hand-loom, the names of specialty shops and departmental stores selling French-Canadian homespuns, may be obtained in making application to the Department of Trade and Commerce, Ottawa (file No. 28050).







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